

A. SHINAN, Y. ZAKOVITCH, *From Gods to God. How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends*, tr. V. Zakovitch, University of Nebraska Press 2012, in 8<sup>o</sup>, pp. 320. Paperback. Price: \$ 27.95. ISBN 978-0-8276-0908-2.

It is not that often nowadays that a book could be described as dangerous. A movie? Possibly, as long as it is a teenage blockbuster. A video game? Why not, given it is a MMORPG. But a book, let alone an academic one? Next to impossible. Having acknowledged this obvious fact we can ascertain that *From Gods to God...* is definitely a dangerous book as it challenges the clichés of thinking about one of the most (un)known book of the world. The reader is pulled away from the stuporous contemplation of the façade and invited to enter the biblical edifice through the backdoor, take a stroll through its abandoned passages and peek into the dusted bookshelves in order to recover the long forgotten and repressed thrillers, anecdotes and erotic novels constituting the Holy Writ. This unforgettable trip is guided by two prime academicians of the Hebrew University: Yair Zakovitch specializes in the Biblical Studies, while Avigdor Shinan deals primarily with the early Rabbinic Literature. Both Professors have penned numerous papers and books (mostly in Hebrew) and appeared outside of the academic setting on many occasions presenting the classical religious texts in a very attractive form. Moreover, both authors are recognized also outside of Israel and cooperate with Universities of Yale, Berkeley and Harvard as well as with other institutions like Jewish Theological Seminary in New York or Paideia Institute in Stockholm.

The present work is the translation of the Hebrew *Lo' Kakha Katuv ba-Tanakh (It Is Not What Is Written in the Bible)* published by Miskal-Yedioth Ahronoth almost ten years ago. Hopefully for the English speaking readers around the world, the sequel, playfully titled *Gam Kakha Lo' Katuv ba-Tanakh (It Is Also Not What Is Written in the Bible)*, published in 2009), would be translated a bit earlier. To render the Hebrew text talking about other Hebrew text into an English one is but a challenging endeavor and credits should go to Valerie Zakovitch who has lived up to the task. Yet, one of the main conclusions drawn from the book is that despite the accessible language along with lucid explanations of the linguistic nuances, at least basic knowledge of Hebrew is indispensable in order to appreciate the art of biblical narratives. Worth highlighting is also the scrupulous effort put into the edition. The book contains practically no typos or any other editorial errors. Given

the presence of numerous foreign terms, consequently transcribed, this achievement is even more worthy of recognition. Moreover, apart from a handy index, the publication has a glossary of extra - biblical sources – extremely useful appendix for a reader not familiar with the literary entourage of the Hebrew Bible. This makes the reading far more convenient without the need to consult Internet resources every time a new term is found. In sum, the highly polished edition of the present book leaves the reader aesthetically satisfied.

The main body of the book is divided into four thematic parts. *The World of Myth* focuses on the utilization of ancient Near Eastern polytheistic material in furnishing the theology of the god of Israel. The stories about various deities of the Hebrews' neighboring cultures are presented as being craftily intertwined so as to leave the reader with an impression that they refer to one heavenly protagonist bearing many names. The second chapter, *Cult and Sacred Geography*, concerns the sociopolitical power of particular myths which provide the cultic centers with the heavenly legitimacy. *Biblical Heroes and Their Biographies* deals with the "celebrities" of the era who endanger the deities with the dispersion of the cult and as such need to be degraded to the status of the servants of Yahveh. In fact, as is the case with Samson or Moses, the mundane heroes themselves seem to be humbled gods of the preceding era. In the final chapter, *Relations between Men and Women*, the authors show off with the methodology of literary archeology in recovering the more frivolous versions of particular stories.

Each part comprises several chapters addressing some specific problems like *Moses or God? Who Split the Sea of Reeds?*, *Was Worshipping the Golden Calf a Sin?* or *What Did Ham Do to His Father?* The chapter *Out of the Fire* shows how it is possible to rearrange the semantic puzzles and arrive to the disturbing conclusions whereas *Finding the Real Killer of Goliath* is the flagship case of the discrepancy between the biblical text and common knowledge. The simple construction of the book, snappy titling of the particular chapters and almost complete lack of the footnotes contribute to the laid-back atmosphere of the volume. Certainly, *From Gods...* is marketed as a popular science book targeted at the non-professionals. Yet, despite (or maybe – "thanks to") its light style the work presents high scholarly value. All the sources are scrupulously cited, the argumentation is clear and logical whereas the conclusions are cautious and solidly grounded.

The tome opens up with an introductory chapter (*When God Fought the Sea Dragons*) which lays off the essential methodological rules re-

sorted to throughout the book. First, the biblical interpretation is likened to the Internet web of connections between particular passages inside and outside of the Bible. These, sometimes completely distant, shed light on each other. Second, the authors explain the basics of what they call the literary archeology – the term aptly grasping the idea behind the endeavor. Just as in the case of the “regular” one, the focus is on digging through the numerous hermeneutic “layers” aggregated over the course of history, collecting the pieces and reconstructing meaningful entireties. There are three main comparison strategies applied in these biblical “excavations”: (1) with the ancient Near Eastern parallels, (2) with analogous stories within the corpus of the Bible and (3) with the later elaborations – the Rabbis as well as apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. The authors prove their exceptional erudition and with both ease and wit operate within the variety of textual sources. Yet, they manage to keep the reader focused on the Bible as the hub of ideas and nexus between the Ancient Near East and Late Antiquity. The introductory chapter exemplifies the above listed strategies with an antique myth of the Chaoskampf as “coded” within the Genesis creation accounts. The authors eloquently show, that the seemingly peaceful story nonetheless betrays (Genesis 1:21) some significant connections with the analogous narrations in *Enuma Elish* or *Gilgamesh Epic*. Moreover, they relate to the peripheries of the Bible which are abundant with references to the cosmogonic conflict with some aquatic monster. Finally, the later rabbinic elaborations are cited which transmit this myth with some minute modifications introduced in order to make the old stories appear more appropriate in the new context. Although it is nowhere stated explicitly, the authors leave no doubts that the words of Ecclesiastes 1:9 are applicable to the Bible comprising ancient Near Eastern material – which by itself could be considered as a result of numerous reiterations. “There is no new thing under the sun”, indeed.

The scholars present their assertions in a completely non-authoritative manner relying on the compelling arguments rather than on the popularity of hypotheses. This manifesto of methodological humility is explicitly stated: “Uncovering historical and biographical facts about figures from the past is not within our powers, nor are we interested in reconstructing them. (...) It is unimportant, in our opinions, whether or not (for example) the Exodus from Egypt, as described in the Bible, actually took place. (...) Our inquiry is not into what actually occurred. Rather, our interests lie in knowing what people told about the history of their world, their people and their heroes” (cf. pp. 14-15).

Yet, even a brief search throughout the reviews demonstrates the diverse and extreme opinions – which is not that surprising given the daring and fresh hypotheses advanced by the authors on the one hand and the fact that they are dealing with the holy writ on the other. Truth being said, the biggest advantages of Shinan's and Zakovitch's endeavor are at the same time its potential weaknesses. Firstly, the ingeniousness and creativity leads to highly hypothetical interpretations and the reader is left with an impression that some significant choices in regards to the illustrative material have been made arbitrarily. Secondly, the cautious methodology resulting in speculative conclusions might be deemed as "non-scientific" by more traditionally oriented scholars and as such expunged from the Bible course syllabi. Thirdly, some issues have been still left unresolved: why to censor some stories and leave the others without any modifications? How far can we go in hypothesizing about the factual writers of the Bible? Finally, is it at all relevant to speak about reiterated parts while the totality of the Bible has undergone the process of retelling?

One of the first sentences of the tome states that the Bible is "the manifesto of the revolutionary thinkers" (cf. p. 1). The authors however seem to overestimate the monotheistic dimension of the Bible as well as the originality of its hypothetical redactors. First and foremost, despite these repeated assertion, the book clearly shows that the monotheism is rather late invention. In fact, the authors themselves present the abundance of the biblical divine names as referring to various traditions only with time attributed to one deity. Moreover, given the fact that the Bible resembles rather an opened sketchbook than a holy (i.e. unapproachable) scroll, one could wonder, whether it was not more of a slow and painstaking evolution rather than a sudden innovation. Finally, the "Bible" in the title is slightly misleading. The wording obviously follows the traditional Jewish ramification of *Tanakh* but the Western reader might be left with the downright false impression that the New Testament is in any way more "historically accurate" than the Old one. Still, given the range of the sources considered in the book on the one hand and the range of application of the methodology promoted by its authors, the "Bible" in the title may be considered to be a right choice.

To conclude, the book primarily witnesses to Shinan's and Zakovitch's broad expertise. They go far beyond the Bible and supply the additional materials like various early translations, apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, later rabbinic commentaries, New Testament and even Qur'an. The authors have chosen and consequently sustained the strategy of keeping

the reader interested. They show with both witty humor and academic scrupulousness that the popular knowledge concerning the Bible is far away from its factual contents. Some conclusions are very appealing while the others seem too far-fetched – yet always though-provoking. Solid methodology makes it a decent handbook for the students of the Bible and Jewish exegesis whereas its accessible language devoid of newspeak invites the adepts of other professions like ancient history or literature. The book can serve as both primer for the beginners as well as wide collection of case-studies and source-references for more experienced students and scholars. Finally, the authors themselves draw from the centuries-old traditions of biblical interpretation and prove that what should count in academic entourage is diversity and creativity – one cannot and should not be satisfied with a single or most popular interpretation.

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